

## [Boiled Ham]

Tales - Anecdotes (Humorous)

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF INFORMANT William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 - 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE January 10, 1939

SUBJECT "BOILED HAM FOR THE STARBOARD WATCH"

1. Date and time of interview January 4, 1939 - 8:00 p.m. January 5, 1939 - 1:00 p.m.
2. Place of interview 38 West 70th Street, NYC
3. Name and address of informant Harry W. Garfield, 38 W. 70th St., NYC
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. Miss M. D. Candee, The Seamen's Church Institute, NYC
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

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### 6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

The small back room occupied by Captain Garfield is on the fourth floor of a very nice, respectable looking rooming house built of brick and stone. His room is meagerly furnished with a cot, a bureau and a chair. West Seventieth Street, on which stand several expensive-looking houses, runs into Central Park West.

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### NEW YORK

### FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 - 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE January 10, 1939

SUBJECT "BOILED HAM FOR THE STARBOARD WATCH"

1. Ancestry Probably Anglo-Saxon
2. Place and date of birth Stockton, California, 1881
3. Family No information
4. Places lived in, with dates Stockton, Cal; San Francisco, Cal; Sydney, Australia; New York City.
5. Education, with dates High School graduate, Stockton, Cal.

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### 6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Seaman and navigator. He holds a Master's license

7. Special skills and interests He constructs ship models, writes good narrative and sings chanteys and songs.

### 8. Community and religious activities

None mentioned

9. Description of informant Height about 5'8"; weight about 165 lbs.; weight about 165 lbs.; complexion medium; hair greying; slightly bald on forehead; disposition, friendly; gentlemanly appearance and deportment.

10. Other Points gained in interview Captain Garfield is evidently in reduced circumstances, and is unemployed.

(See "Extra Comment" - Form D)

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012, 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE January 10, 1939

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SUBJECT BOILED HAM FOR THE STARBOARD WATCH, as told to William Wood "The Lord sends the food And the Devil sends the cooks."

### Sailors' Proverb

There may have been hungrier vessels afloat than the American barque, "Condor," when I made a trip in her as an A.B., about thirty-five years ago, but all hands in the forecabin agreed that she was the poorest feeding ship that any of us ever had sailed in. Our Japanese cook was an "owners' man." He thought, no doubt, that the best way to save money for the stockholders and curry favor with the captain was to keep the sailors on a starvation diet.

We left Puget Sound in December, 1903, with a cargo of lumber for Cape Town, South Africa. It took only a few days to discover that none of us would be likely to suffer from indigestion through over-eating, or develop a case of gout because of the richness of the food. Conditions became worse as the time passed, and the growls from our cosmopolitan crew were loud and long. Bill Watson, my pal in the second mate's watch, hailed from the land where thistles grow. He was away past middle-age and knew all the wrinkles that were worth knowing. He had been in some tough ships, and was quite a diplomat and a sea lawyer. The canny old Scotsman was something of a philosopher, too. "Thank the guid Lord," he used to say, "It's no goin' to last forever, ma laddie. Juist tighten up yer belt a wee bit each day, and the first thing ye ken we shall be around the Horn and get a fair wind all the way to the Cape of Good Hope."

The food got so poor that we decided to send a deputation aft to complain to the skipper. The committee consisted of Hansen - a Swede, Tony - an Italian, two Americans - Jim Coleman and myself, and Bill Watson. Coleman acted as spokesman, and Tony and Hansen carried the beef-kids, one containing salt horse that was nothing but fat and gristle, and the other one half filled with the dish-water the cook palmed off on us for soup.

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The skipper met us at the foot of the ladder leading to the poop. He listened while Jim politely asked him whether it was fair to expect a crew of men to work a ship on such rations. The only satisfaction we got was, "What in Hell do you think this ship is? A floating restaurant, to fatten up a lot of gluttons? Go for'ard, and eat your dinner. If I hear any more grumbling I'll speak to the cook, and maybe you'll really have something to complain about."

As we started back towards the dock-house, the Japanese passed to windward of us with a large smoked ham, steaming hot from the galley, 3 for the officer's table. The aroma nearly drove us frantic, "If sailors got cabin food," remarked Bill, "it might ruin their stomachs, and besides: the skipper and mates might have to eat fo'cs'tle grub afore we get to the Cape. That would be awful, ye ken; it wouldna be the richt thing." We ate our miserable dinner in silence, and at eight bells went out on deck and relieved the port watch.

All that afternoon, Bill and I worked on top of the house, repairing some boat gear. The skylight window was open, and we could hear the clatter of the cook's pots and pans. Occasionally, too, we could hear him singing to himself in his native language. The pleasant odor of boiled ham, wafting its way upward, only reminded us of the long and hungry passage ahead of us. We heard the cook locking the galley door, and saw him shuffling along the deck as he made his way to his room for his customary afternoon nap.

My pal walked over and gazed longingly through the strong iron grating that protected the galley skylight. The bars were six inches apart. He beckoned to me to look down. There, on the sideboard below, we could see the ham. It seemed as though only a few slices had been cut off. Bill said he always had been a "releegious mon," but that he never had thought it sinful for sailors to steal food on board of a ship. He supported this theory on the ground that appetizing morsels should be kept out of reach; usually they are.

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Forecastle conversation in the second dog-watch, that evening, was confined to discussions on the merits of various delicacies obtainable ashore. Tony expressed his opinion of the joys of eating Italian spaghetti. The Swede said that a big steak was his favorite dish and that he was going to find the largest one to be had in Capetown. Fred, a young Cockney, said that his mouth watered for a plate of fried fish and chipped potatoes. Jim and I agreed that bacon and eggs were hard to beat, while Bill avowed his fondness for boiled ham. At eight o'clock the other watch went on deck, and we who had the watch below prepared to turn in until midnight. Bill stayed up smoking a little while longer than usual, and I noticed him searching into his kit bag. At last he found what he apparently had been looking for - a small, red, tin box, flat in shape and about two inches square. This he carefully placed in his trousers' pocket, and then he undressed, lowered the wick in the forecastle lamp and turned in.

When we went on deck again at midnight I had to take my two - hour trick at the wheel and my pal, Bill, had to stand his two hour lookout on the forecastle head. At four bells (2 a.m.), we both were relieved and we strolled up and down the forward deck together, passing and re-passing the locked door of the cook's galley. The night was somewhat dark. There was no moon, and only a few stars were visible. Our watch-mates, with the exceptions of the man at the wheel and the man on the lookout, were pacing the after deck. No one was near the galley. The men below were sleeping in their bunks.

Bill suddenly paused in his stride, and said to me in a low voice, "I've sailed in some hungry ships out of Glesgie, but Mon! I've never seen the likes o' this wagon. She isna fit tae sail under the 5 Stars and Stripes." He stopped a moment and then continued: "If the Old Man thinks I can live on fresh air and suction, he's making a big mistake."

He took me by the arm, and leading me to the forward end of the deck house, he whispered, "Keep yer eyes peeled, ma lad, and keep yer ears open and yer mouth closed; I've got tae hurry." Pulling something from his pocket which, in the dim light, seemed to resemble the little tin box he had fished out of his bag, the previous evening, Bill stealthily

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mounted the iron rungs of the perpendicular ladder leading to the top of the deck-house, and vanished into the darkness.

He had been gone about fifteen or twenty minutes, and I was commencing to feel a little uneasy. We were sailing "by the wind," and, any minute, the second mate might take a notion to order a pull on the lee braces. I felt still more concerned when I heard a banging sound suggestive of pots falling. The noise came from the direction of the galley, but there was no light. I knew the cook would not be stirring about until after four o'clock, and I was afraid that some of the men pacing the deck might have heard the din.

Whatever could my pal be doing? Had he broken into the galley through the skylight? That was almost impossible because of the heavy iron bars; besides, he would have great difficulty in climbing out again. I crept towards the galley door and tried the handle. The door was locked fast, as the cook had left it. Hastening back to the forward part of the house, I got there just in time to see Bill descending the ladder with something bulky under his arm. He made his way quickly into the forecastle, and by the light of the dimly burning oil lamp I saw him wrap a fine ham, nearly whole, in a clean dungaree jacket which he pulled out of his kit bag. Hiding his prize under his pillow, he took from his trousers' pocket the little tin box and replaced it in the bag. Then he hurried back on deck, just as the second mate yelled out the order, "Lee fore brace."

By the time we had finished tightening all the braces and coiling up the gear it was almost four o'clock, and when eight bells were struck the watch was relieved and we went below. As soon as the last man was inside the forecastle door, Bill brought forth his spoils from under the pillow and said: "The Lord sent manna to the starving Israelites in the wilderness, and some kind Providence has sent a delectable ham tae the poor hungry seamen o' the starboard watch of the barque, Condor. Dinna tempt Providence, ma lads, by asking foolish questions. There's enough for us all, and I'm going to cut it up. Each mon sall get his whack, and he'll get nae mair. This is to be a banquet fit for a king."

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While favoring his astonished watch-mates with his little speech, Bill was busily dividing the ham with a sheath knife. He made six equal portions - one for each man - and there was at least a pound to the portion. I never saw food disappear so quickly into the mouths of human beings, and I can say, truthfully, that I have never eaten a meal with greater relish. "Noo," said Bill, "let a 'word to the wise' be sufficecient; forget that ye ever heered o' such a thing as boiled ham, to say naething o' tasting a slice." He opened the forecandle door and 7 threw the bone over the side. Hardly fifteen minutes had passed since we had come off watch, but the last remnant of the feast had vanished. We lit our pipes for a few minutes smoke before turning into our bunks. The dawn was breaking, and the last man to undress had just put out the light when angry mutterings in Japanese greeted our ears.

Only a bulkhead partition separated the cook's galley from the forecandle, and the heathen's angry voice, growing louder, left no doubt in our minds that he had discovered his loss, and that he was vowing an awful retribution on some person or persons unknown. The hubbub of utensils being thrown and kicked about made it seem as though he were trying to wreak a vengeance on every pot and pan. After the noise ceased, I heard faint chucklings issuing from the direction of Bill Watson's bunk.

Those of us who had enjoyed the early morning repast were somewhat surprised that nothing was said about the affair when we went on deck to stand the forenoon watch. Perhaps the pangs of guilty conscience were troubling Bill and me. I don't know. But we seemed to feel an unusual iciness in the attitude of the officers, that day, and whenever we were anywhere near the quaterdeck we could sense the penetrating eyes of the skipper, as though he were looking us through and through. Once I saw him talking earnestly with the cook - the Old Man was reputed to speak Japanese fairly well, and I surmised that they were discussing the possibility that someone among the sailors had a key to the galley. I told Bill about it and he agreed with me. He said, "They're planning to set a snare, just the same as auld Satan lays doon tae catch the unwary 8 feet o' the sinful, but they'll no find this bird fleein' into their trap."



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The weeks dragged along. Our little adventure seemed to be a closed incident. So discreet were the men who had participated in the forecastle banquet, that not one of them ever made reference to it in his conversation. We weathered Cape Horn in good style, passing the island of Deigo Ramires about the middle of March.

One Saturday afternoon, when we were about halfway across the South Atlantic, rolling steadily towards Capetown with a nice stiff breeze on the port quarter, I noticed a fragrant and familiar odor coming from the cook's domain. There was no mistaking that smell; it was of smoked ham, boiling in the pot. No doubt it was being cooked a day ahead of time, and would be warmed up the following day for the captain's dinner. To satisfy my curiosity and confirm the accuracy of my sense of smell, I climbed to the top of the house that evening, in the second dog watch, on the pretext of hanging some shirts up to dry. Passing the galley skylight I glanced down, and there, sure enough, was a huge kettle with the lid off, pushed away to the corner of the stove farthest from the fire. Half submerged in water was a freshly cooked ham. When I told my pal about it, his eyes fairly lit up.

We had the first watch below that evening, and I noticed that Bill fumbled about in his kit bag after the rest of us had turned in. It was about half past eight when he lowered the light and crawled into his bunk without taking off his trousers. Soon afterwards I fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept, but I was awakened, suddenly, by a succession of unearthly yells proceeding from the other side of the bulkhead partition. At the same time I heard the pit-a-pat of bare feet scurrying overhead. The yells were succeeded by loud and angry jabberings in Japanese. The whole watch below were awake by this time, and we all tumbled out on deck to see what was the matter.

Bill Watson, who seemed to appear out of nowhere, and who had no shoes on, reached the galley at the same moment as I did - just as the door opened and the cook came out, still hollering and jabbering away and clutching wildly at the seat of his pants. The first mate and the watch on deck, having heard the commotion, were now on the scene, wondering what could have possessed the cook, whose English was very difficult to

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understand even when he was at peace with the world, and whose ravings now meant nothing, "What's wrong with him?" the mate demanded, "has he gone crazy?"

"I think, sir," volunteered Coleman, "that the full moon has made him get like that. I've heard that the Japanese people suffer a lot from this kind of madness." Bill said he had heard the same thing, and that the best cure for a moon-struck person was to dip his head in a bucket of water.

There was hardly a man in the forward crew who did not detest the cook, as much for his arrogance as for his stinginess with the food. Now was the time to get back at him. Bill's suggested cure was an inspiration. Near by stood a large tub of salt water which was used for washing decks every morning. Without any delay, Tony and the Swede picked our friend up bodily and doused him head first in the tub.

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They were about to baptize him a second time when the captain came hurrying along the deck, and explanations followed. "The cook tells me," the Old Man said, "that some one of you fellows broke into the galley, where he was sleeping, and stabbed him in the seat of the pants."

Even as the skipper was talking, a torn spot was plainly visible in the victim's trousers, but it was equally plain to us that the Old Man didn't quite believe the story. It was too ridiculous. Why should anyone want to break in and stab the cook in the stern? And how could anyone get out of the galley without being seen, and lock the door after him? The mate was fully convinced, by now that the cook was either mad or had awakened out of a nightmare.

Next morning, word came forward that the skipper actually had discovered and treated a slight wound just where the cook had said he was hurt. A mere scratch, it proved to be; the Old Man told the mate he thought the cook ran a foul of a nail. Sunday passed away quietly as usual. The sailors were fed their Sabbath-Day dinner of boulli beef, stringy and

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tough out of the big cans from the Chicago packing houses - and marked "Crew Beef," probably to make sure that, by no mischance would it ever be served at the officers' table. For supper we had the customary "cracker hash," made by breaking up hard Liverpool pantiles with a belaying-pin and moistening the crumbs with watery soup saved from dinner.

It was Bill's lookout from eight to ten that night and when I relieved him on the forecandle head, he said to me, in a low voice, 11 "Mon, ye cam' verra near gettin' another feast last night. I didna ken the heathen was sleepin' in the galley." This is all he would say on the subject, and as I watched his walking aft to report his relief I wondered what in the world could have been the old fox's technique.

Sometime afterwards, when we were nearing Capetown, I happened to be at the wheel one morning. The Captain, in one of his few benevolent moods, engaged me in conversation. He thought it probable that the Condor might have to wait two months or more for a new cargo after discharging her load of lumber, and asked me if I thought that any of the seamen would like to be paid off when we arrived. I knew what was in his mind. He was estimating the amount of money that could be saved in wages if the men were willing to leave. I told him that while I could not state with certainty what plans the others might have, I myself fully intended leaving.

We finally arrived, and the day soon came to pay off. Most of the forward crew chose to accept their discharge, to the skipper's unconcealed gratification. While the Commissioner was waiting for the accounts to be rendered, the captain stated that he wished to add the price of one ham to the articles purchased from the slop-chest by William Watson, Able Seaman. This demand, the philosophic William challenged vigorously and in no uncertain terms, on legal grounds as well as on general principles. And he was sustained by the Commissioner.

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Seeing that he had lost the point, our skipper said to Bill, "Well, I'm willing to forget about it if you tell me how you got the ham the first time, and what happened between you and the cook on the night 12 he was sleeping on the bench in the galley. Furthermore you'll have to give me the key," But my Scotch friend was not putting his foot into any of "Auld Satan's" snares. He no longer had to fear possibility of vengeance - harsh discipline or curtailment of meager diet. "First, Captain," he said, "pay me ma honest wages, that I've worked for, and then tell me what maks ye think I took yer ham."

The money was handed over, and after it was carefully counted and stuffed into Bill's pocket, the Old Man said, "Well, Watson, I know you took the ham, because the cook saw you open the forecastle door early one morning as he was unlocking the galley to go to work. He recognized you, with a big bone in your hand, and he saw you throw it over the side. When he entered the galley, he found pots and pans on the floor, his large kettle upset, and discovered that the ham was missing."

The captain watched Bill's face closely while speaking, but my pal's countenance was like a stone image. The skipper continued, "The cook is certain that he made no mistake of identification in your case. He is not sure, however, who it was that stabbed him as he slept in the galley. As a matter of fact I am not satisfied that he was stabbed at all, although I dressed a superficial wound on that part of his anatomy which nature provided for him to sit down. The whole thing is a mystery to me. Clear it up, if you can, like a good fellow, and I shall hold nothing against you."

Watson hesitated a moment, and then delivered himself as follows, speaking slowly, as if measuring his words: "Aweel, Captain," 13 he said, "ye'r verra kind, and I'm no waitin' tae leave ony hard feelin's. I'll no deny that I like boiled ham, and I'm no sayin' who it was that removed the fine specimen that was missed from the galley. But I'd advise ye to tell that puir benighted heathen tae keep the skylight window closed after dark, in case some hungry sailor might be prowling around on top of the hoose, devisin' ways and means o' procurin' something tae eat." As he spoke, Bill drew forth from his trousers pocket a little

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red tin box, and a small ball of heavy whipcord from the pocket of his coat. Opening the box, he displayed three fair sized fishhooks, bound together with fine wire and surmounted by a handy loup, to which the end of his whipcord could be attached very easily. "Ye see, Captain," he concluded, a hungry mon might be tempted by Satan tae go fishin' between the bars o' the skylight gratin' for something nice tae eat, and he micht possibly haul up a fine ham. And thin then , again, if the cook is sae daft as tae sleep on a hard bench in the galley, when he has a nice comfortable bunk in his ain room, he canna blame Providence if he gets hurt."

With that, Bill plucked from the hooks a tiny piece of cloth which had a definite resemblance to the nether garment of the Japanese cook of the American barque, Condor. He closed the box and returned it to his pocket, together with the roll of whipcord. We left the office amid roars of laughter from the Commissioner and our late captain, and hurried to the nearest restaurant to enjoy a good meal. There we found several of our shipmates eating with gusto.

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 - 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE January 10, 1939

SUBJECT BOILED HAM FOR THE STARBOARD WATCH

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My informant, Captain Harry W. Garfield, who is at present unemployed, formerly was associated with the Feng Shun Exhibition Corporation, in an enterprise to bring from China and exploit at the World's Fair a large junk. Captain Garfield's official title in the company was Maritime Director. The invasion of China and the blockade of its coasts by the Japanese negated the company's plans and left the captain economically impoverished.